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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NASSAU 001400

SIPDIS

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TAGS: OFDP PREL CU BF

SUBJECT: BAHAMAS PLANS TO UPGRADE DIPLOMATIC PRESENCE IN HAVANA

Classified By: CHARGE ROBERT M. WITAJEWSKI FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) On Friday, July 16, 2004, Foreign Minister Fred Mitchell and Under Secretary for Consular Affairs Carlton Wright returned from a Caricom meeting in Cuba, and held a conference during which Foreign Minister Mitchell reiterated his hope that The Bahamas will be able to open a consulate/embassy in Havana in the near future. Mitchell justified the initiative saying it would provide consular services to Bahamian students and Bahamians imprisoned in Cuba, as well foster communication (and business) in agriculture and maritime issues in particular. Foreign Ministry Permanent Secretary Patricia Rodgers (number two in

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the Ministry) told Charge July 19 that she expects a Bahamian diplomatic mission to have been established in Havana by January or February 2005.  
End Summary

BAHAMIAN-CUBAN RELATIONS

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¶2. (U) Following the Minister's trip to Haiti as part of the five-person team sent by Caricom to investigate the situation in Haiti, FM Mitchell and Foreign Ministry Under Secretary Carlton Wright traveled to Havana for the previously-scheduled Cuba-Caricom meeting. This meeting was a follow-up to the December 2002 meeting at which Cuba and the then "Big 4" of the Caribbean -- Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana and Jamaica -- signed an accord and agreed to hold biennial meetings.

¶3. (U) Long-rumored to be "in the works", Foreign Minister Mitchell reiterated The Bahamas' intention to open a consulate/embassy in Havana in the near future. Mitchell was quoted by local media declaring that "as a matter of practicality, it seems the prudent thing to do would be to offer consular services at the very least". Cuban Consul General to The Bahamas, Felix Wilson, has claimed that on average 20,000 Bahamians travel to Cuba each year for a variety of reasons: healthcare, medical training, tertiary education, and vacation.

¶4. (U) Mitchell proudly announced that The Bahamas is Caricom's biggest trading partner with Cuba, with traded goods estimated at a value of USD 22.7 million per year. FM Mitchell suggested to the Minister of Agriculture that he look into the possibility of trading fruits and vegetables.

¶5. (U) During their stay in Cuba, Mitchell and Wright were taken to several potential building sites by their Cuban hosts. Mitchell told Bahamian media that funds to establish a presence in Cuba were budgeted into the 2004/2005 budget. Under Secretary Wright has plans to return to Havana in two to three weeks to provide consular services to imprisoned Bahamians. Minister Mitchell indicated that Mr. Wright is likely to be the person designated to open the facility.

FOREIGN MINISTRY OFFICIALS SEEM TO KNOW WHAT THEY ARE IN FOR

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¶6. (C) Speaking with Charge July 19, Foreign Ministry Permanent Secretary Dr. Patricia Rodgers said that she expected that the Bahamian mission in Cuba would be functioning "no later than January or February of next year." As justification, she noted that there were currently at least one hundred Bahamians studying medicine in Cuba, that thousands of Bahamians traveled regularly to Cuba for inexpensive medical treatment, and that there was pressure from Bahamian business persons to establish a diplomatic presence as a way of facilitating their business dealings with the Cubans. Bahamian Mr. Tennyson Wells has been pressing the Bahamian Foreign Ministry and Ministry of Agriculture to establish a diplomatic presence so that his shipping company will have representation in Cuba.

¶7. (C) Musing on the benefits of a consulate versus an

embassy, Dr. Rodgers said that with the large number of countries already having ambassadors in Havana, establishing only a consular presence would leave The Bahamas "ignored and discriminated against" by Minrex (the Cuban Foreign Ministry).  
¶18. (C) Queried if they knew what conditions would be like in Cuba, Dr. Rodgers wanly smiled "yes." She had already her own list of complaints about the prices and services rendered by Cubalse. Similarly, she "hoped" that the Government would send a professional diplomat and not a political appointee to Havana. Aware of security concerns resulting from hiring Cubans, she said that she hoped that the Foreign Ministry would also be permitted to send their own staff to work in critical areas of the embassy. "I suppose that we will have to train them to talk in code even in restaurants," she exclaimed. Charge confirmed that Bahamian diplomats should have no expectation of any privacy either at work, in public, or in their homes.

COMMENT

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¶19. (C) It is likely that Minister Mitchell hopes to facilitate repatriation of illegal Cuban migrants interdicted in Bahamian waters with this gesture and that this is the quid pro quo expected of the Cuban Government. Currently, the Government of Cuba only accepts its nationals back a few at a time, causing The Bahamas to hold Cuban nationals in detention for months until repatriation -- a very costly venture for the Bahamian government.

¶10. (C) It is difficult to imagine any concrete benefits to The Bahamas from establishing a closer relationship to Cuba. The small size of the Bahamian population precludes major commercial sales to/purchases from Cuba, but Bahamians currently trading do make significant profits. Medi-tourism is growing as fiscally prudent Bahamians seek a high-quality, lower-cost alternative to Miami for medical treatment. Ideologically, FM Mitchell and others in the Bahamian cabinet will also get psychological gratification from proving that they can conduct an independent foreign policy at odds with superpower neighbor.

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